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COSTA RICA: A MORE MILITANT EXTREME LEFT

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Summary

The radical left in Costa Rica is stepping up its paramilitary readiness, terrorist capabilities, and anti-US propaganda efforts. We believe the new militancy reflects not only dissatisfaction among younger members with the left's traditional electoral strategy but also factors such as Cuban and Nicaraguan encouragement, fears that Sandinista border incursions may fan anti-Communist sentiment in Costa Rica, and a reaction to the growing US role in Central America. In addition, we believe this growing militancy is part of a long-term effort to prepare for eventual revolutionary action. We believe extreme leftist groups will engage increasingly in violence over the next few years as they seek to increase their capability to exploit social and economic problems. Lacking a professional military and relying on poorly trained and poorly equipped civil and rural guards, Costa Rica is particularly vulnerable even to sporadic leftist violence.

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This memorandum was requested by William Walker, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. It was prepared by the Central America South Branch, Office of African and Latin American Analysis, and was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations and the National Intelligence Officer for Latin America. It contains information available as of 23 September 1985. Questions and comments are welcome and should be addressed to Chief, Middle America/Caribbean Division, ALA.

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The Costa Rican far left encompasses four main parties. The largest of them, the Costa Rican People's Party (PPC), is a traditional Moscow-oriented Communist party, with a present membership of 5,200, according to our best estimates. [redacted] General Secretary Manuel Mora has long favored participating in the electoral system until Costa Rican conditions are ripe for revolution. Based on a review of US Embassy [redacted] reporting, however, a new, militant direction in the PPC has become evident over the past two years, chiefly attributable to the new generation of party members and perceived failure of the electoral strategy. As a consequence, Mora has been forced to acquiesce in an increasingly aggressive course of action to forestall a loss of younger members. [redacted]

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[redacted] the generational shift toward greater militancy has been dramatically underscored by a recent decision to replace Mora with his son--leader of the party's paramilitary arm-- [redacted] We believe this move may signal a turn toward more open radicalism. [redacted]

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The Popular Vanguard Party (PVP) split from Mora in late 1983 and openly espouses even a more militant philosophy than the PPC. [redacted]

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[redacted] The party also promotes land takeovers by unemployed peasants in the south where traditionally the Communists have possessed pockets of substantial influence. [redacted]

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The pro-Cuban New Republic Movement (MNR), the most terrorist-prone group on the left, is believed to have carried out the 1981 bombing of a US Marine vehicle and a bank robbery earlier this year by some of its Cuban-trained operatives. [redacted] the party has participated in violent strikes, and also has ties to Colombia's M-19 movement. MNR leader Sergio Erick Ardon formed a political alliance with the PVP and PS in 1982 for the sake of immediate political gains--such as election to the Legislative Assembly [redacted] The [redacted] estimated 100-200 militants seek not only the immediate destabilization of the government but the removal of all foreign investors. [redacted]

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The Socialist Party (PS) is headed by longtime leftist Alvaro Montero, who is virulently anti-US and an ardent admirer of Fidel Castro. The PS, a small party of some 50-100 intellectuals, has adopted a new, militant direction over the past 18 months while publicly endorsing electoral participation. [redacted]

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[redacted] In addition, his party spearheaded a propaganda campaign [redacted] the Voice of America station in Costa Rica and likely was behind several bomb threats [redacted] site earlier this year. [redacted]

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Few Electoral Successes

We believe the far left's rising militancy represents a shift in response to changing circumstances in Costa Rica and the region; the electoral route followed by the left so far has brought it little return. In 1982, the leftist parties suffered both relative and absolute declines in the popular vote for Assembly deputies. At the same time, they failed to boost their traditional 3-percent share of the presidential balloting despite high expectations based on a well-conceived and well-financed campaign, according to the US Embassy. As they have turned to militancy, the major leftist groups also have increasingly discussed achieving greater unity, so far with marginal results.

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Encouragement From Abroad

Costa Rican leftists rely heavily on Cuba and Nicaragua for advice, financial support, arms, and training. In addition, the Costa Ricans have sought assistance from Libya, Iran, and the Soviet Union.

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Paramilitary Readiness

Nicaraguan training has been key to the efforts of the Costa Rican extreme left to maintain a paramilitary capability in the event fighting expands in the region or the opportunity arises to launch a revolution in Costa Rica. The most important organization is the Mora-Canas brigade, which fought alongside the Sandinistas during the 1979 revolution and was formally organized in 1981 as the PPC's paramilitary arm. The brigade includes militants from both Communist parties, however, as well as members of the MNR and the PS. [redacted] actual membership may be as high as 800, but we believe that generally only 300-350 have been active at any one time. In the past, brigade members have received military training in Cuba, the Soviet Union and Bulgaria. [redacted]

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[redacted] members have received guerrilla warfare training in Nicaragua. The Sandinista Army has used the brigade for patrolling near the southern border and to pursue opposition forces fleeing into Costa Rica. [redacted] in recent months the unit has taken a more active role in combat, participating in the July offensive against Eden Pastora's anti-Sandinista forces in southern Nicaragua. As a result, the [redacted] brigade members have incurred many casualties from both combat and disease, and were so lacking food and medicines by mid-September that PPC leaders were threatening to withdraw the brigade to Costa Rica, accusing the Sandinistas of maltreatment. [redacted]

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Terrorist Capabilities

Low-level terrorist activity has appeared sporadically in Costa Rica since March 1981, when members of "La Familia"--a splinter faction of what is now the MNR--exploded a bomb under a US Marine vehicle. [redacted] Within the radical leftist spectrum, the MNR is considered the party most prone to use violence and terrorist-style tactics.

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Anti-US Activities

Costa Rican leftists have tried to counter San Jose's growing ties to Washington by making US military aid the focal point for demonstrations and propaganda. In May, two Communist-led demonstrations protesting the arrival of US military advisers resulted in clashes with police, according to press accounts. In addition, leftist legislators in August blocked the port visit of a US aircraft carrier, successfully arguing that such a visit required legislative approval.

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In addition, the PPC plans to establish a paramilitary organization in the Costa Rican province of Limon in response to the growing regional conflict and increased US security assistance to San Jose.

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PPC party leadership wants to be prepared to deal with a violent anti-Communist reaction by both private groups and the government security forces that might arise from continued clashes between Sandinista forces and the Costa Rican civil guard. The concern is likely to be reinforced by the repercussions of the border clash on 31 May in which two Costa Rican guardsmen were killed. An anti-Sandinista demonstration on 10 June turned violent when several hundred protesters, mostly members of the rightwing Free Costa Rica Movement, stoned the Nicaraguan Embassy in San Jose, according to press and US Embassy reporting. Violence erupted again the next day when a little-known rightist group, Homeland and Freedom, bombed an electrical transmission tower--part of a grid providing electrical power to Nicaragua--in northern Costa Rica. Some civil guard reservists probably were also involved in the bombing, according to the US Defense Attache.

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Prospects

The left's improving capabilities and the solidifying of the trend toward more activist radical leadership seem likely to lead to an incremental increase in activities--including violence--by extremists during the next few years. Moreover, if opposition candidate Rafael Calderon--now a slight favorite in the polls--is elected President in February, the pace of leftist activity could accelerate. Calderon, representing the Social Christian Unity Party, has sharply criticized the Monge administration for being "soft" on Nicaragua. He repeatedly has threatened to break diplomatic relations with Managua and to seek closer ties with the US if he assumes the presidency. His conservative outlook is almost certain to provoke the extreme leftist parties, particularly if they make a dismal showing in the elections. With no prospects for a marked upturn in the economy, moreover, Costa Rica will continue to face grave social and economic problems that the left will try to exploit.

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A growing anti-Communist climate, along with continued Cuban and Nicaraguan pressure, may push the extreme leftist groups toward greater cooperation. Infusions of promised financial aid from Havana and Tripoli--by no means certain, given their past track records--would constitute a strong incentive for unity. Moreover, a Libyan connection presumably would encourage more violent tactics, because Qadhafi probably would pressure these groups to conduct terrorist operations against US personnel and facilities as well as Costa Rican officials as a condition for aid.

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Nonetheless, the extreme left faces a number of constraints that will limit its near-term growth and impact. Personal rivalries and a tradition of fractiousness must be overcome before unification can be realized, and the left will need substantial improvements in materiel and training before acquiring the capability to sustain revolutionary action. Despite foreign support to the left, in our view neither Nicaragua nor Cuba is likely to encourage a fullfledged insurgency in Costa Rica in the next year because they do not perceive Costa Rica as ripe for revolution. Managua and Havana may encourage isolated terrorist incidents, however, which in the past have severely tested San Jose's security capabilities. Lacking a professional military and relying on poorly trained and poorly equipped civil and rural guards, Costa Rica is particularly vulnerable to leftist violence.

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